

RARE BIRD SIGHTINGS FROM ADMIRALTY BAY, KING GEORGE ISLAND,
SOUTH SHETLAND ISLANDS, ANTARCTICA, 1976—1987⁷

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INTRODUCTION

The area surrounding the year-round Polish Arctowski Station at Point Thomas, Admiralty Bay, King George Island, South Shetland Islands (62 10S, 58 30W, Fig. 1) has been under observation by Polish scientists and our U.S. Research team since October 1976. During this time, we have been studying the behaviour, ecology, and demography of the three sympatrically breeding *Pygoscelis* penguins; the Adélie *P. adeliae*, Gentoo *P. papua* and Chinstrap *P. antarctica*; as well as most of the other seabirds that breed in the vicinity: Southern Giant Petrel *Macronectes giganteus*, Pintado Petrel *Daption capense*, Wilson's Stormpetrel *Oceanites oceanicus*, Blackbellied Stormpetrel *Fregetta tropica*, Blue-eyed Shag or Imperial Cormorant *Phalacrocorax atriceps*, Subantarctic Skua *Catharacta antarctica*, South Polar Skua *C. maccormicki*, and Antarctic Tern *Sterna vittata*. Over the decade 1976-1987 we have recorded several other species outside their normal ranges of distribution. Most of these sightings have occurred during the austral spring and summer, and have been predominantly vagrants from South America. The following is a summary of the rare birds observed in this area.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

Magellanic Penguin *Spheniscus magellanicus*

On 17 January 1984, we sighted an apparently healthy juvenile Magellanic Penguin near the Point Thomas penguin colony. There was a large, well-healed scar on its back, presumably from a Leopard Seal *Hydrurga leptonyx* or Antarctic Fur Seal *Arctocephalus gazella*, which did not inhibit its movements. It remained for only one day, standing on the beach among the three *Pygoscelis* species. This is the first recorded sighting of a Magellanic Penguin for King George Island.

The normal breeding range of the Magellanic Penguin is from southwestern South America east to the Falkland Islands (51 45S, 59 30W); they are also often found at sea in the Drake Passage (Boswell & MacIver 1975, Watson 1975, D.G. Ainley pers. comm.). Several reports of Magellanic Penguin sightings outside of these areas have been made from South Georgia (54 15S, 36 45W; Tickell 1965, Prince & Payne 1979, Prince & Croxall 1983), the Tristan da Cunha group (c. 37S, 14W; Elliott 1957), Hawkes Bay, New Zealand (39 50S, 176 50E; Robertson et al. 1972), and Philip Island, Australia (dead, c. 38 30S, 145 15E; McEvey 1980).

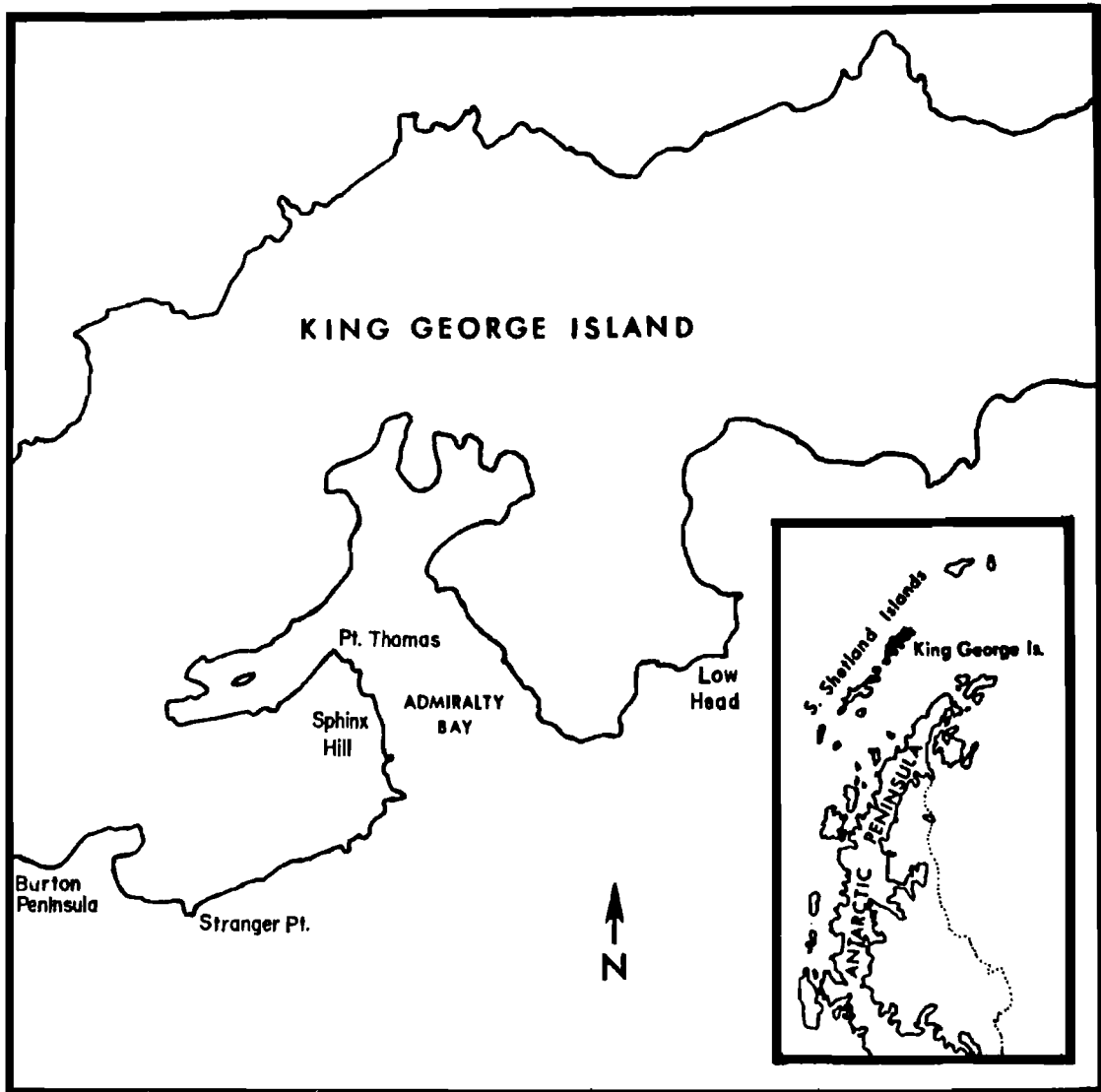


Figure 1

The Admiralty Bay region on King George Island

Our sighting represents the most southerly record of the Magellanic Penguin, but not the first to cross the Antarctic Polar Front (APF). Prince & Payne (1979) suggested that those seen on South Georgia were from the Falkland Islands, thus bringing them across the APF. Previously, the most southerly sighting was in the Drake Passage near the APF (58 28S, 65 34W; D.G. Ainley, pers. comm.).

Rockhopper Penguin *Eudyptes chrysocome*

A healthy individual in adult plumage was seen among Gentoo Penguins at the Sphinx Hill penguin colony by G. Geupel on 2 November 1985. It remained for only one day. Photographs were taken to verify identification, but the subspecies was not determined; it presumably was of the southern race *E. c. chrysocome*. This is the first recorded sighting of a Rockhopper Penguin on King George Island but not the most southerly record for this species. An adult male came ashore at Cormorant Island (64 08S, 63 58W) on 29 December 1980. It was in good condition except for a broken flipper, so was collected for inspection (Matthew 1982). Two other individuals were seen the following summer at the Point Thomas penguin colony. The first, a somewhat emaciated adult, appeared on 24 December 1986 among Chinstrap Penguins on the beach, but was not seen again. The second, a two-year-old of the southern subspecies (P. Harrison pers. comm.), arrived on 25 January 1987 and proceeded to moult in a small Chinstrap Penguin colony. It was still there upon our departure on 4 February 1987.

The normal breeding range of the Rockhopper Penguin, for the South American sector, is the Falkland Islands, Tierra del Fuego, and the islands off Cape Horn (De Schauensee 1970, Harrison 1983). There are reports of breeding pairs (one per site) from South Georgia (Prince & Payne 1979) and Cape Bowles, Clarence Island (61 17S, 54 04W, the most southerly breeding record; Furse 1979). Sightings of non-breeding individuals have also been made at South Georgia (one adult, two subadults; Prince & Payne 1979) and Moe Island, South Orkneys (60 45S, 45 42W; one adult; Tickell 1960). A reported sighting on Humble Island (64 46S, 64 06W) by a British team in 1956 was later questioned by Holdgate (1963), who thought it more likely to be of a Macaroni Penguin.

Macaroni Penguin *Eudyptes chrysolophus*

Macaroni Penguins are regular visitors to the Admiralty Bay area but do not breed there, the nearest breeding site being Deception Island (62 57S, 60 38W). The most southerly breeding record is from Humble Island (64 46S, 64 06W) where a pair with one egg was found in 1985-86; no young were produced (Parmelee & Parmelee 1987). Both adults and juveniles frequently appeared in our study colonies in mid- to late austral summer. This is well within their normal range and we do not consider the species a rarity for the area.

Emperor Penguin *Aptenodytes forsteri*

Juvenile Emperor Penguins are occasionally seen in midwinter at Point Thomas by Polish scientists (K. Zielinski pers. comm.), and recently, in January 1987, one was seen in nearby Maxwell Bay (62 15S, 58 51W) at the Russian Station, Bellingshausen (M.P. Harris pers. comm.). Although the nearest Emperor Penguin breeding area to King George Island is at Marguerite Bay (68 30S, 68 30W), some 1 325 km distant on the Antarctic Peninsula, the pelagic range of this species is reported to include regions approximately 250 km to the south of the island. We therefore consider these sightings to be unusual rather than rare.

Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*

Four dead specimens, in the same state of decay, were found in austral summer 1984-85 and 1985-86 on four different beaches in the Admiralty Bay area; Point Thomas, Sphinx Hill (62 11S, 58 27W), Low Head (62 09S, 58 08W), and Burton Peninsula (62 14S, 58 46W) (see Fig. 1). All of these were complete, with head, legs, and feet intact, and one even retained some head feathers with the rusty breeding plumage still visible. Since King George Island is so far from their normal range and supports little food for a Cattle Egret (e.g., large insects and frogs; Terres 1980), these birds probably died from a combination of exhaustion and starvation.

This is the first record of the Cattle Egret for King George Island. As recently as March 1986, two separate sightings were made of small flocks on the pack-ice edge in the Weddell Sea (63 10S, 49 40W), and Bransfield Straits (no coordinates given). These birds were alive, but in weakened, emaciated states, and some had already fallen prey to Pintado Petrels or Southern Giant Petrels (D.G. Ainley and W.R. Fraser, pers. comm.). There are several other records, south of the APF from South Georgia, over many years: 1977, 1981, 1982, and most years since (Prince & Croxall 1983, J.P. Croxall *in litt.*). Newton et al. (1983), Enticott (1984), Richardson (1984) and Roux & Martinez (1987) have reported sightings of this species from Tristan da Cunha, Gough (40 21S, 09 53W), Marion (46 52S, 37 51E) and Amsterdam Islands (37 50S, 77 35E), all north of the APF. These birds arrived alive and survived from one week to over three months.

Chiloe Wigeon *Anas sibilatrix*

Four male Chiloe Wigeons arrived at Point Thomas on 11 November 1981, following a storm with strong northwesterly winds. They remained in the vicinity until 20 December 1981 (46 days), when three of the four disappeared. The fourth bird was found dead, presumably killed and partially eaten by a Subantarctic Skua. During their stay, they were often seen feeding among fresh-water algae blooms near the Point Thomas penguin colony. Since this species is reported to be a consumer of freshwater vegetation (De Schauensee 1970), and

three of the four wigeons survived in apparent good health, we concluded that they subsisted on freshwater algae.

The normal breeding distribution of the Chiloe Wigeon is southern Chile and Argentina (De Schauensee 1970), but there are several previous records south of this range. An emaciated male was found dead on the South Orkney Islands (60 35S, 45 30W) in mid-October 1966 (Watson 1975). Four separate single sightings (possibly not of the same individual) were made in 1980 at Palmer Station, Anvers Island (64 33S, 63 35W), on 25 and 27 February, and 3 and 8 March. The bird of 27 February was identified as a male (Maxson & Bernstein 1980, D.F. Parmelee in litt.). There are also several records for South Georgia (Prince & Croxall 1983). Our sighting on King George Island, therefore, was not the most southerly for this species, but was of the longest duration in an area so far outside its range.

South Georgia or Yellowbilled Pintail *Anas georgica*

On 25 October 1985, J. Sicinski observed 20 South Georgia Pintails in the Point Thomas area. One was collected and positively identified by colouration but the feathers were too worn and damaged to determine the subspecies. All but six pintails were gone by 28 October, and these left on 30 October. No observations were made of feeding activity, and the stomach of the collected bird was empty, although there was some body fat and they all appeared healthy.

Anas georgica is a permanent resident on South Georgia, and *A. g. spinicauda* (the South American subspecies) is found over much of South America and the Falkland Islands (Delacour 1956). Although there have been several sightings farther south, this is the first recorded sighting of *Anas georgica* in the King George Island area. *A. g. spinicauda* was reported on Deception Island, South Shetland Islands in 1916 and 1917 (Bennett 1922, cited in Watson 1975), one *A. g. georgica* was seen briefly on Breaker Island (64 46S, 64 07W) in January 1975 (Parmelee et al. 1977), and several were seen near Palmer Station (64 46S, 64 04W) throughout the 1979-80 austral summer (Maxson & Bernstein 1980).

Whiterumped Sandpiper *Calidris fuscicollis*

A flock of about 25 Whiterumped Sandpipers was first observed on 22 October 1985 near the Point Thomas penguin colony. They remained all summer, and were still present when we left on 13 February 1986. During early summer they were most often seen foraging around the peripheries of penguin sub-colonies, among rocks and melt-water run-off, and on a marshy, grassed area nearby. We could not determine by observation what was being eaten, but the stomach contents of one collected specimen consisted totally of green algae. Later in the season they foraged almost exclusively in the intertidal area of the rock beach beneath the nearby glacier. At this time it was clear they were again eating algae, since they were observed pulling long strands from pools among the

rocks. The following summer (1986-87), only one individual was sighted at the nearby Sphinx Hill penguin colony and was not seen again. When compared with previous years, the winter of 1986 was particularly long and harsh, which may have had an effect on the migratory movements of the sandpipers.

These sightings are not the first for King George Island, since three individuals were seen for several days at the Ardley Island penguin colony (62 13S, 58 56W) in October 1981 (Bannasch et al. 1984); but they are the first for Admiralty Bay. There have also been records from South Georgia (Tickell 1960, Prince & Payne 1979), Livingston Island (62 36S, 60 30W; Gajordo & Yanez 1982, cited in Hemmings 1985), and Tristan de Cunha (Richardson 1984). Recently (summer, 1985-86), two separate sightings were made by a tour group on Half Moon (62 36S, 59 55W) and Deception Islands (Anon. pers. comm.), the latter being the southernmost sighting on record.

The Whiterumped Sandpiper has extremely long migrations, breeding in the North American Arctic and wintering in southern South America and the Falkland Islands (Johnsgard 1981). Since the number of sightings has increased over the past few years, and these individuals appeared to be surviving on local food items, it is possible that this species is making a southerly range extension of its wintering grounds.

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